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UNCLAS HANOI 000220

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SUBJECT: MORE SENTENCES FOR PUBLIC PROTESTS

REF: A. FBIS JPP20030113000060 B. HANOI 031
- C. 02 Hanoi 2713 D. Hanoi 0175

11. (U) An official of the Nam Dinh Provincial People's Court confirmed to emboff on January 28 the substance of media reports (ref a) about the sentencing on December 18 of ten people involved in public protests in Hong Thuan commune of Giao Thuy district in that province. He also confirmed that sentences ranged between eighteen months and five years.

12. (U) According to the official, protests over local corruption and agricultural land use taxes dated back at least to June 2000, when some local residents -- including local Communist Party officials -- first allegedly "sabotaged" official meetings set up to handle public complaints. Some residents also apparently "illegally detained" the local chief of personnel and chief of the district office for up to a week. Other local residents then tried to "sabotage" May 2002 National Assembly elections, he claimed.

13. (U) The court official noted that local and provincial officials had attempted to resolve complaints by "firing" or transferring some of the officials accused of corruption, but local residents continued to "cause public disorder" by attempting to hand deliver complaints to more senior CPV and GVN officials. The organizers were arrested in May 2002, he said.

14. (U) Minister of Government Office Doan Manh Giao told the press on January 11 that the GVN would soon issue a new decree to deal with citizens "abusing democracy" to "cause social unrest" or "undermine social stability." He predicted, however, that it would take a "long time" to draft a law on "this sensitive issue" and noted that the eventual decree would not only "stipulate what, how and where demonstrators are allowed to protest" but also provide clearer fines and punishment. He admitted the "more and more people" were using complaints and petitions to incite people to protest.

15. (U) Comment: Similar to protests over land use and local corruption that have led to a string of sentences in near-by Hatay province (refs b and c), the Nam Dinh case again demonstrates both local ire over incompetent and/or corrupt officials as well as the continued sensitivity of land issues, both of which were major themes of the most recent CPV Central Committee plenum (ref d). The protests are also clear indications that the law on denunciations and complaints is not working very well (the 2002 revised version may help improve this process eventually -- septel), that Vietnamese are still willing to take their complaints on some issues to the street, and that the GVN will react strongly against perceived "agitators" who "threaten" public order.

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